

“Do you want to fly today, or not?”

Since he was putting it that way, what could I say? He did know this plane better than I did, having flown it twice a day all week, and yes, he was the one with over 1000 hours of flight time. So, who was I to quote a memorized rule book at him, a decorated combat pilot deigning to teach a snot-nosed teenager how to fly? And for free, no less.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Then let’s go.”

I throttled up, taking over officially as Pilot In Command with the ritual nod to my instructor, and announcing my take off to the open air field, even though no one else was in the pattern. My fellow students were standing back by the open office door, already pointing and starting to make their critiques, no doubt waiting for my first landing of our touch and go sequence to laugh, as usual. For the only girl in the advanced group, having passed my FAA written didn’t mean I was lucky to get to fly the 172, and didn’t mean they respected my ability to memorize the manuals, or to tutor ground school. It meant that the guys in the 150s and the 152 got to ask why I could be so smart, and not land the damned plane after 9 hours of flight time. So, here we went, again.

“Turning downwind, I have my intended point of touchdown.”

A taciturn nod of the head in that hot and noisy cabin was more than enough to see that the confidence in my landing ability was no better up here than it was down there. Skidding my turn, yet again, into final approach, I hoped I was judging the distance right. Flaring at 5 feet was no easy feat when the altimeter is useless from the time you think you’re about to land on the roof of the hangar. Memorizing two landings manuals and endless discussions of what the sight picture should look like by that point had not helped much, either. This time I just crabbed into the wind and hoped that the guy standing on the taxiway was close enough to be a good guideline. Better to flare a bit too close, as long as I got to full stall, than risk bouncing, again. I’d learned that my own eyes were simply not trustworthy, and so I had to rely on that famous photographic memory from the last time I got yelled at for flaring too high. Since it always looked like we were about to dig a big hole in the ground, I figured someone would yell at me if I waited too long.

“Take off again.”

Calling in our 4th touch and go, I hoped no one else was waiting for lunch while I logged an extra few minutes of flying time. The embarrassment of me not soloing would be too much to bear for those who’d put me in this advanced group, so I sent a prayer that my next landing would be a perfect one. As I rotated and looked ahead toward our emergency landing point, I noticed that things were finally nice and peaceful. We were only about 300 feet off of the ground, and it was nice and quiet. Then it hit me.

It was quiet because the engine had died.

I looked down and decided that we couldn't possibly land, with the little bit of runway remaining below us, but we didn't have enough altitude to clear those trees, let alone make it to our emergency landing spot. Just as I was deciding that it was time to call in a Mayday and say my last prayers, the normally slow moving man to my right shot a glance to either side, then shoved the yoke as far forward as it would go. While my stomach protested as our seat belts held our heads on, I added my weight to his, pushing our 172 back down to the runway, and wondering just how many inches we would have, if we could flare in time. He waited longer than I'd imagined possible, and then yanked the yoke back all the way to our seats. Surprised to see our 172 actually responding to controls, I was shocked when we slammed into the ground, and merely rolled as if landing hot. Evidently, our Cessna did not understand that we were not meant to be back on the runway yet, and obligingly landed just where it was told. But it did not stop when we told it to. Two sets of feet pressing desperately against separate brake pedals did nothing to slow our approach toward the large brier patch off the end of the runway. We kept pressing, slowing down, and then as if tired of all the exertion, the brakes simply gave out. As we rolled freely forward, feeling the front gear banging into every bush and stump, I called in a "Pan" to the office, letting everyone know that we'd made it to the ground safely, and expected to be able to walk away from this landing, even if our only 172 might need a tow.

"What happened? Didn't you do a run-up?"

"I did, but he said to fly anyway."

"What?"

"I got a 200 rpm drop on the left magneto, and a 300 rpm drop on the right, but with both mags it ran fine, and he said that it was just like that, and told me to take off!"

"You idiot, girl, you know you should have walked away!"

"But he was yelling at me!"

"Yeah, well how's that crash landing working out for you?"

This flight scholarship might just not be worth all that, after all, huh?